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ABSTRACT

Theories of socialization have developed independently of established facts against which to measure their adequacy. Studies showing low levels of skin conductance and slow latency of response among criminals have supported a bio-social theory that criminals inherit neurological systems that impede reduction of fear and interfere with learning. Before this theory can be accepted, several issues must be considered, including the heritability of physiological response differences, the assumption that learning requires fear, the relationship between measured autonomic system responses and the attributed emotions, and the temporal order between slow autonomic responses and punitive social experiences among criminals. Social Learning Theory asserts that socialization involves using approval as a reward and disapproval or physical pain as punishment. In contrast, the Opponent-process Theory suggests conditions under which punishment and reward operate in opposition to what has been considered their typical reinforcement valences. It is important to know how people learn to view things as rewards or punishments. Both Differential Association Theory and Labelling Theory focus on the interface between social phenomena and individual perceptions, but more research is needed to establish facts against which to test these theories. Because knowledge about the sequence of events will be crucial to understanding causal relationships, data must be gathered from longitudinal studies. (NRB)

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A Longitudinal Approach to Building Theory for studying Socialization

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Abstract

A LONGITUDINAL APPROACH TO BUILDING THEORY FOR STUDYING SOCIALIZATION

Joan McCord, Ph.D.

The paper discusses the role of theory and applications in the field of socialization. Noting that socialization theories developed independently of clearly established facts against which to measure their adequacy, the author suggests alternative interpretations of the evidence to which a variety of such theories point. Because none of the theories has resulted either in the accurate differentiation of future criminals from noncriminals or as basis for successful prevention programs, the author suggests that priority be given to learning about the sequence of events through longitudinal studies.

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A LONGITUDINAL APPROACH TO BUILDING THEORY FOR STUDYING SOCIALIZATION

Joan McCord, Ph.D.

Theory presupposes a set of facts for which it gives an account. A theory of arithmetic, for example, must allow for an infinite supply of numbers, transitivity, identity, and an inverse. A theory of ethics must account for guilt, dilemmas, and the motivational force of moral judgments. A theory of language must account for an infinite supply of sentences, learning, and a distinction between use and meaning.

In the field of socialization, however, theories developed independently of established facts against which to measure their adequacy. Rather, such theories as Differential Association (Sutherland & Cressey, 1924/1974), Control theory (Hirschi, 1969), strain theory (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938), Labelling Theory (Lemert, 1951), and Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963) operate as templates to be used in a search for facts. None of these theories, tested for more than a decade, has resulted either in the accurate differentiation of future criminals from noncriminals or as basis for successful prevention programs.

Recently, criminologists have built new theories by combining old

theories, hoping to improve predictions. Glaser (1978, 1979), for example, melded Differential Association and Control theory with Opportunity Theory to form a Theory of Differential Anticipation. Greenwood & Zimring (1985) integrated Control and Social Learning theories with physical theories and Opportunity Theory. Elliott, Ageton, and Canter (1979) combined strain, Control, and Social Learning theories with a modified version of Differential Association Theory. Klein and Mednick (1982) combined Aversive Inhibitory Conditioning Theory with Labelling Theory, suggesting that biological differences determine whether criminal sanctions increase or decrease criminality.

This paper expresses qualms about the strong priority given to theory. It suggests that knowledge about the sequence of events is crucial to evaluating theories and therefore, to understanding socialization.

Belief in a genetic influence on behavior dates at least from the ancient Greeks, for Plato included control over breeding in The Republic, his description of an ideal state. More recently, Lombroso (1896/1911) developed the empirical foundations of criminology through a biological theory of criminal behavior.

Although no specific theory has withstood critical evaluations, modern evidence has re-introduced biological factors as among the causes of crime. Mednick and his co-workers (Pollock et al., 1983) studied Danish records on several thousand adopted men whose biological and sociological fathers' criminal convictions were known. Among those whose biological parents were not criminals but whose adopting parents included a criminal, 15% were criminal; among those whose adopting parents were not criminals but whose biological parents included a criminal, 20% were criminal. The difference certainly suggests that biogenetic factors have a part in the production of crime.

Mednick and Volavka (1980) proposed an explanation: Criminals inherit neurological systems that impede reduction of fear and therefore interfere with learning. In support of this "bio-social theory," its proponents point to the relatively low levels of skin conductance and the slow latency of response found among criminals in several studies.

Evidence on at least four issues ought to be sought before Mednick's bio-social theory joins the list of accepted explanations for crime. First, the heritability of physiological response differences should be checked.

Slow response rates could be typical of criminals and yet not be the inherited condition to which the adoption studies point. Evidence has not yet shown that adopted sons of criminals have low levels of skin conductance or slow latency of response. The slow response rates found among criminals could reflect differences in experiences related to criminality, but not be inherited characteristics.

Second, the primary assumption that learning how to act requires fear needs confirmation. On its face, this assumption appears to be either circular or false. Children often seem to do what they are asked without any sign of a potential sanction. Therefore, the underlying assumption of psychological hedonism should be tested.

Third, more work should be done to test the relationship between the measured autonomic system responses and the attributed emotions. Whether skin conductance indicates dissipation of fear or whether slow recovery rates represent hyporesponsiveness has been questioned by several researchers (e.g., Blackburn, 1978; Hare, 1978; Mawson & Mawson, 1977; Siddle & Trasler, 1981).

Fourth, the temporal order between slow autonomic responses and

punitive social experiences among criminals needs study. Criminals may have learned to ignore pain. Exposure to violence has a desensitizing effect (Cline et al., 1973; Thomas, 1977). Studies also have shown that criminals are more likely than noncriminals to have been exposed to physical abuse (Bandura & Walters, 1959; Farrington,1978; Glueck & Glueck, 1950; McCord, 1983). Without evidence about early autonomic responsiveness, one cannot distinguish between differences introduced by socialization and biological differences affecting how infants respond to similar socialization practices.

Less controversial than biological theories, psycho-social theories are equally subject to errors of mistaken sequencing.

Social Learning Theory asserts that people repeat behavior that is rewarded and avoid behavior that is punished. Maccoby (1980) summarized: "Children learn from their own experience with pleasant or painful outcomes and also by example" (336).

Studies of family socialization practices have seemed to present a coherent picture of the development of antisocial behavior. Rejection, harsh or inconsistent discipline, and parental conflict mark the homes of criminals more frequently than those of noncriminals (Farrington & West, 1981;

McCord, 1979, 1982; Olweus, 1980; Pulkkinen, 1983). These descriptions seem to depict parents who do not reinforce good behavior and who model successful, aggressive behavior. Several studies measured parental behavior before the occurrence of delinquency, so their evidence has been interpreted as demonstrating that parental behavior caused criminal behavior. Yet misbehavior predicts further misbehavior (Farrington, 1979, in press; McCord, 1980, 1985; Mitchell & Rosa, 1981; Robins, 1978). And the earlier misbehavior may have elicited the erratic, rejecting, harsh parental behavior.

Children may generate different forms of socialization. That adults prefer children who smile, talk spontaneously with adults, and look them in the eye has been demonstrated in the laboratory (Cantor & Gelfand, 1977). Plausibly, children differentially inherit the qualities leading parents to enjoy holding them, feeding them, and otherwise socializing them in ways that produce prosocial behavior.

According to Social Learning Theory, socialization typically involves using approval as a reward and disapproval or physical pain as punishment. Yet people voluntarily and frequently risk pain. For example, they play

contact sports. Clearly, too, people often place themselves outside the range of potential approval.

Theories invoking a striving for status, a desire for success, and a search for enhanced self-esteem seem to provide explanations of why delinquents do poorly in school (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Glaser, 1978; Kaplan, 1980). Yet programs designed to increase success in school have failed to prevent delinquency (Gersten et al., 1979; Jones et al., 1981).

Laboratory studies have shown that unexpectedly good results can be more disturbing to the recipients than expectedly mediocre results (Austin & Walster, 1974), and laboratory studies have shown that rewards sometimes create disincentives (Green & Lepper, 1974; Lepper & Green, 1978; Schwartz, 1982). Such studies raise the possibility that success in school may be disturbing to some youngsters and that school failure need not be frustrating.

The Opponent-process Theory (Solomon, 1980) suggests conditions under which punishment and reward operate in opposition to what has been considered their typical reinforcement valences. If Solomon is correct, criminals may have acquired a taste for the pains administered in attempts

to deter their activities.

We need to know how people learn to view particular things as rewards and other things as punishments. Very possibly, using something as a reward is one way of teaching what to count as a pleasure. Using something as a punishment may teach people to be pained by that thing. At a minimum, the direction of learning is unclear. In view of an obvious diversity in the sorts of events that operate as incentives, predictions must be incomplete without knowledge of who will find what an incentive.

Both Differential Association Theory and Labelling Theory focus on the interface between social phenomena and individual perceptions. According to Differential Association Theory, people learn how to act through exposure to definitions of situations, becoming delinquent in response to an excess of definitions favorable to violations of the law. According to Labelling Theory, people act in response to the role expectations they encounter. Both theories suggest that behavior follows from social milieu. Neither adequately addresses questions about differential selection of friends, of spouses, and of significant others.

Clearly, more research is needed in order to establish facts against

which to test theories. Because knowledge about the sequence of events will be crucial to understanding causal relationships, data must be gathered from longitudinal studies. Perhaps by learning about the early misbehavior of children, the responses of others to detection of misbehavior, and the children's attitudes toward these responses, it will be possible to learn effective approaches to halting criminal careers before they become threats to others.

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